SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT (SFWMD)
WATER RESOURCES ADVISORY COMMISSION (WRAC)
LAKE OKEECHOBEE COMMITTEE MEETING – March 29, 2006
University of Florida/IFAS, 2199 South Rock Road
Ft. Pierce, FL
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
MEETING REPORT

This is a summary of the March 26 WRAC Lake Okeechobee Committee meeting.

- **COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:** Following discussion of the need to continue to lower the lake level, and in the context of the discussion about the proposed "WSE" Regulation Schedule revisions, **the WRAC Lake Okeechobee Committee recommended that:**

  "the Water Resources Advisory Commission (WRAC) request that the SFWMD Governing Board direct SFWMD staff to determine a safe discharge level for continuing pulse releases in Zone E from Lake Okeechobee, as measured at the downstream limits (S-79 and S-80), until the water levels in Lake Okeechobee return to Zone D of the existing "WSE" Regulation Schedule. This determination should be done in conjunction with Martin and Lee counties. Monitoring of seagrasses, should be included in the determination of the safe discharge level."

- **The Committee agreed that if additional releases were determined to be beneficial to the lake and safe for the estuaries, the SFWMD staff should ask the Governing Board to consider recommending such action to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.**

INTRODUCTION:

- Committee Co-Chair and SFWMD Governing Board member Lennart Lindahl called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone. For good cause shown, pursuant to Chapter 120, F.S., swapped the order of items 3 and 4 on the agenda.
- Chair Lindahl noted progress on lake recovery issues exemplified by recent ground breakings for C-43 and C-44 Reservoir test cell projects.
- The committee heard presentations about:
  - The Evolution of Water Management in the Lake Okeechobee/Everglades Ecosystem
  - Lake Okeechobee "WSE" Regulation Schedule Alternatives
- The committee discussed draft recommendations from the February 22 meeting, and agreed on a process for future meetings to set priorities for the recommendations.
- Lake Okeechobee water level was 14.62' on 3/29/06.

- Lake Okeechobee Committee presentations will be posted to http://www.sfwmd.gov, "Governing Board/WRAC".

ISSUES/DISCUSSION BY COMMITTEE:

- **Member Issues:**
  - A spreadsheet drafted by Richard Earp will be sent to the committee.
  - A concern was raised that the water quality components of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed project might not be implemented. A pilot project for water quality improvements is being drafted by the SFWMD. Other agencies have been invited to help draft the pilot project so that the water quality components can be successfully implemented based on a good pilot project design.
  - Lake Okeechobee and Estuary Plan components for "Best Management Practices" (BMPs) and revisions to criteria for Environmental Resources Permits (ERP) are moving forward. A draft of all appropriate BMP and ERP rules, when available, will be sent to the committee.
  - Concern about phosphorus loading to estuaries. Need a bill in the Legislature to prohibit sale of phosphorus fertilizers in the Lake Okeechobee basins. To begin work on the LOER component to reduce use of phosphorous fertilizers in the Lake Okechobee basins, SFWMD staff recently met with representatives of the fertilizer industry to discuss the issue.
  - Need a video to educate the public about impacts of fertilizer on the estuaries and the lake.

- **Evolution of Water Management in the Lake Okeechobee/Everglades System (Tom MacVicar) – Discussion:**
  - Why is the West Palm Beach Water Catchment Area more dependent now on lake water? Answer: The Technical Sub-Committee can include appropriate information on that in its report.
  - Questions about difference in the lake footprint from 1830 to present, why agriculture is producing 3.5 gallons for release to the Everglades and Water Conservation Areas for each gallon used: Answer: Part of the lake was cut off with construction of the Hoover Dike so the lake is smaller today than it was in the 1830s. Agriculture produces more water because during the wet season the Everglades Agricultural Area gets more rainfall than needed for crop irrigation.
  - Questions and comments about amount of inflow to the lake today. Answer: there is no data to show that the lake is getting more water today from northern inflows. But the lake has increasing problems. 2 years of storms have totally stirred up the lake which is now the biggest problem.

- Comment and discussion about role of the lake and EAA in providing water flow to the Everglades. A significant problem is that with changes brought by construction of the C&SF Project, some 2-3 million acre feet/year are discharged to tide. Can't build enough storage without Aquifer Storage and Recovery to alleviate that much volume.

- **Lake Okeechobee "WSE" Regulation Schedule Alternatives (Pete Milam) – Discussion:**
  - Questions about the protocols and minimum flows and levels for the Caloosahatchee River. Answer: RECOVER performance measure is 450 cfs., which is more than the adopted minimum flow and level.
  - Corps of Engineers has added modified Alternative 2: Will now be Alternatives 2A and 2B, based on operational scenarios.
  - Committee asked many questions about:
    - the alternatives;
    - the need to incorporate plans for a managed recession next year;
    - problems with removing sediment from canals;
    - need for continuing releases to help the lake – why stop at 14'?
    - need to better evaluate impact of limitations of Stormwater Treatment Areas to accept and treat lake water**,** and how that information should be plugged in to the Alternatives: Answer: Study and modeling assumes lake water quality issues would be the same for the next three years. There will be a matrix produced within a few weeks that will show the predicted times flows will be met or exceeded;
    - concern about adequate time to review the Tentatively Selected Plan (TSP). Answer: there will be a 45-day review period once the draft Environmental Impact Statement with the TSP, is produced.
    - Other discussion about limits of the STAs including STA ¾. Modifications to the Cross and Bolles Canals should help open up flows to the east and west and get some nutrient settling. STAs 6 and most of STA-2 perform better than others with more sawgrass and natural mosaics of plants. Incorporating results of monitoring them into design and operational plans for STA optimization.
    - Question about design of STA ¾ and bypassing when rainfall too high. STA's and estuaries are taking more water than the EAA therefore the EAA is not sharing the same adversity. Answer: STA's were designed to handle a 25-year storm event. Built to enable bypass when necessary.

- **Public Comment:**
    - Question: under what conditions can the Corps of Engineers deviate from the approved WSE Schedule. Concern about when relief for the estuaries can be expected – need it sooner than 2020. Answer: The WSE Schedule EIS includes a Water Control Plan. For recent temporary deviations, Corps developed “Class Limits Adjustments” and an Environmental Assessment was done. Authority to deviate by more than the approved amounts requires a new EIS. The studies for the “WSE” regulation schedule revisions include evaluation of a variety of scenarios.

- **Committee Discussion - Recommendations:** Results of the afternoon discussion session about recommendations will be completed and posted as a separate document.